



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

News Release

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ICE RETURNS STOLEN COLONIAL MASTERPIECE TO PERUVIAN GOVERNMENT

16th century El Altar de Challapampa was stolen from Peru in 2002

WASHINGTON, D.C. – John P. Clark, Deputy Assistant Secretary of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Eduardo Ferrero, the Ambassador of Peru to the United States, today announced the return of El altar de Challapampa (The Altar of Challapampa) to the government of Peru.

In January 2002, the altarpiece was reported stolen from its temporary location near Lake Titicaca at Challapampa, Peru. In May 2003, after the ICE New York field office launched an investigation, the artifact was discovered in Santa Fe, New Mexico at Ron Messick Fine Arts and Antiquities (RMFAA).

ICE worked closely with the Washington, D.C. Interpol office, and the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York and sought criminal prosecution of the owner of RMFAA, Ron Messick. Ultimately, prosecution was abated due to Messick's poor health and he subsequently died. Executors to Messick's estate voluntarily surrendered the artifact to the Department of Homeland Security and it was stored in El Paso, Texas.

"This altarpiece is on its way back to its rightful place," said Clark. "By seizing and returning El Altar de Challapampa, we transform it from a plundered artifact to a symbol of what cooperation and a mutual respect of cultural treasures between nations can bring."

"The return of this altar is the result of the coordinated work among U.S. authorities at all levels and the Government of Peru," said Ambassador Ferrero. "This case serves as a warning for those who consider a nation's cultural artifacts mere commodities to be bought and sold. We will vigorously pursue these thefts and work with our international partners to hold those responsible accountable for their actions."

Bernardo Bitti, an Italian Jesuit missionary, painted and gilded El Altar de Challapampa in the late 16th century after it was carved by sculptor Pedro de Vargas. The altarpiece is a polychrome wooden carving of the angels Michael and Gabriel beneath a crucifixion in four large pieces. The artifact weighs more than 800 pounds and stands nearly 12 feet tall when assembled.

The recovery and repatriation of “El Altar de Challapampa” is pursuant to the “Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of Peru concerning the Imposition of Import Restrictions on Archaeological Material from the Pre-Hispanic Cultures and Certain Ethnological Material from the Colonial Period of Peru” and the Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act. The Department of Homeland Security has law enforcement implementing authority under the Act. The Cultural Heritage Center of the State Department’s Bureau for Educational and Cultural Affairs is responsible for oversight of the MOU under which Colonial Period objects such as this altar are restricted from entering the U.S. without a Peruvian export license.

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of five integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.